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AUTHOR Roth, Audrey J.
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ABSTRACT

Organizing writing students into three-member editorial groups is a teaching technique that focuses student attention on the stages of the writing process, their progression, and their interrelation. The technique also increases peer cooperation and evaluation, while enabling teachers to spend less time grading homework and more time working with students who need special attention. In each editorial group, one student concentrates on one facet of the composition--authoring, editing, or proofreading. Each group submits one paper for each writing assignment, and group members receive the same grade for their combined efforts. During the course, each group member will shift to a different responsibility within the group: and ultimately, after several of the group assignments, students will be expected to write one or more papers alone. As part of the emphasis on peer involvement, all students in the class are asked to comment on all the papers written for the course. Although editorial grouping may not be feasible for every writing class, most students who have been involved with the technique thus far have expressed interest and enjoyment concerning their increased involvement in the writing process. (RL)

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EDITORIAL GROUPS: A WRITING PROCESS

Audrey J. Roth

At my college the teaching load is all too typical: five classes a term with enrollment of 33 in the first term composition course and 38 in the second. Even with predictable attrition, that still makes for a staggering load of papers for just one composition assignment. And I haven't yet been able to bring myself to say I'm teaching composition without having my students write compositions. I believe in frequent writing. So even if I only read some of the papers, I would still spend more hours reading them than I wanted to.

Furthermore, a number of years ago I decided it was silly for me to be the sole audience for every piece of writing anyone did. As I began to learn about small group work I tried to apply other people's good ideas in my classrooms. Students exchanged papers, round-robined them, changed and shifted as my thoughts did.

One day I carried to class an armload of old drafts and colleague evaluations, editorial and type-marked manuscript pages, and proofs--leftovers from a book I'd done. In the course of a discussion in one class, the students indicated some interest in how a book went from an author's notions to the bound volume they had to buy at the bookstore. So I planned to give an illustrated lecture on the subject, describing a process (conventional theme assignment) while the students took notes so they could write a summary (note-taking skill and writing a summary equaled two more of my course objectives).

You can tell this happened several years ago because I called them "objectives" rather than "competencies."

Somewhere around the type marking explanation I realized how very many people actually worked on a single book. And between the galleys and the page proof I again thought about the large number of people with separate responsibilities who made my words (as an author) get into print on a page.

That's the genesis of the Editorial Groups that have been the basis of my composition classes for about three years--except for one class I'm teaching this term and which I'll mention in a few minutes.

In an Editorial Group, each student concentrates on just one facet of commposition--authoring, editing, or proofreading---before being asked to take responsibility for all those jobs alone. The audience for the writing is very clear; it's the class. And everyone in the class reads and comments on the work of each Editorial Group--an aspect of the course that students have consistently rated the most valuable part of the term for them.

Here's the way I use the Editorial Groups: [distribute handout]

An Editorial Group consists of three people, each of whom has an assigned role in writing each of three papers: as author, editor, and proofreader. The group submits just one paper each time--a combined effort--and each member receives the grade assigned to the paper. Subsequently, each student writes one or more papers alone--fulfilling all three roles. They do continue to evaluate each other's writing, because I hope that by this process students learn some critical judgment. And I'll come back to this evaluation in a moment.

In my classes, students select their own group members, but the grouping can obviously be handled in other ways. If, after dividing into three's, there is one person left over, he or

Audrey J. Roth
Miami-Dade Community College
Miami, Florida 33167

EDITORIAL GROUPS

An Editorial Group consists of three people:

An author - who develops ideas and writes them down

An editor - who helps develop ideas and turn them into writing, checks the applicability of writing to audience and purpose, and helps with the organization of ideas if necessary

A proofreader - who checks the mechanics of a piece of writing and contributes to the development of ideas as required

The Editorial Process

1. Editoral conference (to consider audience, purpose, idea, approach, etc.)
2. Author writes piece
3. Group goes over work in conference
   a. Editor checks for purpose, organization, etc.
   b. Proofreader makes preliminary editorial changes and checks mechanics, clarity, etc.
4. Author rewrites piece
5. Group goes over work again
6. Typist (from the group) puts work onto ditto
7. Group checks ditto for accuracy (and may make changes if it accepts responsibility for typing another ditto)
8. Ditto is run off and distributed to class
9. Audience responds to written piece

SAMPLE FROM AUTHOR GUIDE SHEET

Is the topic sufficiently narrow? Can something worthwhile be said about it in the time available for essay preparation and in a reasonable amount of writing space?

What is your purpose in writing this piece? What sort of response are you looking for?

Do you have something you really want to communicate? Are you writing just to fulfill an assignment and get it over with?

Do you have enough information about the topic to begin writing about it?

Do you present several facets of your main idea in the paper? Is each facet supported, developed, explained, or illustrated?

(over)

SAMPLE FROM EDITOR GUIDE SHEET

Is there a main idea evident in this piece? Does it carry throughout? At what point does it become evident?

What aspects of the main idea does the author develop? Are there other possibilities for expansion?

Does the author use examples, support, or illustration for each aspect of the main idea? Are these specific?

Does the opening paragraph make you want to read more?

Do you have a sense of satisfaction, of completion at the end of the piece?

SAMPLE FROM PROOFREADER GUIDE SHEET

Is the language concrete? specific?

Does the language make you, as a reader, see, hear, taste, touch, smell?

Are words used accurately?

Are there unnecessary repetitions of words? Of ideas?

Are all words spelled conventionally?

Is conventional capitalization used?

Is there subject/verb agreement in each sentence? Noun/pronoun agreement?

SAMPLE FROM STUDENT EVALUATION CHECK SHEET

	Good	So-so	Weak
Are various aspects of the overriding idea developed?			
Does the piece really seem to have something to say?			
Are all statements explored, supported, or examined?			
Is conventional capitalization used?			

she may work with a group; if there are two people, they form a group for which I will act as proofreader for the first round. It is best for each group to remain together for the series of three papers. However, illnesses and the natural attrition of composition classes requires someshifting of groups. So far, the natural friendliness of students and their willingness to help each other has posed no problem for necessary group changes.

Editorial Group members decide among themselves who will fulfill each role for each paper. The only rule is that they must rotate the responsibilities. Students have in-class time to work on their papers because differences of class schedules and working hours have generally made it difficult for group members to get together outside of class. However, each person has the phone number of others in the group and they often are able to do some of their work over the phone. I usually allow three class hours to write one paper--but the author has to come to the first session with a draft of the work. The author also has to do the revision at home.

While students work in the groups during class time, I drculate among them, answering questions, prodding, settling disagreements, and generally acting as resource person.

An Editorial Group begins its work by discussing possible writing topics. Sometimes these are based on reading, sometimes on film we have viewed in class, sometimes on free choice topics. The author has final choice of writing topic, but this early discussion helps an author focus on what he or she wants to write and students help each other select topics narrow enough to elicit good writing. This is, of course, the

pre-writing stage we already know is so important for students to become accustomed to.

Each member of the Editorial Group has a Guide Sheet for each role she or he will have to fulfill. The Guide Sheet lists a number of questions to be answered by the person fulfilling a particular role. (Students are encouraged to add questions or to ignore those that seem useless.) Experience shows that students who respond to as many questions as possible in their roles do better than those who omit many questions--and far better than those who ignore the Guide Sheets entirely (which sometimes happens, at least for the first paper).

The Guide Sheets I use are each about a page long. But on the handout are some sample questions from each of the three Guide Sheets.

The author writes a draft copy of the proposed paper at home, then brings it to class to share with the editor, who is the prime reviewer of the work (although the Proofreader often participates in the talk at this stage rather than simply remaining silent.)

I conceive of the editor's work as being primarily concerned with questions of structure and organization as well as an awareness of concerns with logic and development of ideas.

The author has a chance to revise the essay on the basis of the editor's response to the first draft. Occasionally an Editorial Group has another conference and the editor looks at a second draft; however, the author almost always assumes responsibility for making suggested changes. I stress that any changes are those the author is willing to make; the editor's (and proofreader's) comments don't need to be followed

if the author feels that doing so will not strengthen the composition.

Finally, the proofreader uses the Proofreader's Guide Sheet to help look over the essay. On it are questions about language and mechanics. (See handout)

The author confers with the proofreader to make any needed revisions on the essay. Then, one person in the Editorial Group puts the work on a ditto which I run off and distribute to each member of the class so we can discuss the essay of each group. (I have learned to caution students that the author of a group ought to read the ditto before it is turned in to me to be sure no unknown changes are made by the person writing or typing the ditto.)

A large class with many groups means that much time will be spent discussing the essays. Students say they learn most from these class discussions--the best of them keeping notes on the papers and checking their future work against the information that emerges from the discussions.

After the first group-written theme, I try to get students to evaluate what they've done. [Distribute evaluation of experience sheet.] I usually have time for discussion of the first two essays, but then the short time in a term becomes very evident. We will have read a goodly number of essays together near the end of the term, and the activity loses its novely and freshmess. Therefore, when the third essay of each Editorial Group is distributed, each class develops its own evaluation list for the theme. Drawing from the questions on the Guide Sheets and recalling class discussions, each lists what it deems important. I put the items on a ditto in the

form you see illustrated. When each group receives the third group paper, she or he also receives an individual response sheet to fill out and return to the Editoral Group. Thus, after two experiences of being a member of a whole-class evaluation, each student becomes an individual critic of the pieces of writing.

You can see that the questions can be checked in one of three columns: Good, So-so, and Weak. However, I encourage students to comment on individual aspects of each paper as they read, just as I do. My response sheets are likely to have more comments on them than those of the students; they also contain a grade for the essay. (I also assign letter grades for the other papers from the Editorial Groups. My copy of each ditto is likely to have on it comments not mentioned in class and I try to see at least one member of an Editorial Group to explain those notes when the paper is returned after a class discussion.)

So far, I have found almost no students unwilling to be part of an Editorial Group, accept the group grade, or have his or her name appear on the ditto of any essay. (Those who object are usually allowed to do individual work.) However, I weight the course work so that the Editorial Group grades are not of overriding importance, for students seem to prefer to be responsibile for the bulk of their own grades.

Students have responded very well to working in the three-person Editorial Groups. There are difficulties, of course. Chief among them is that some people want their ideas incorporated into a paper, no matter what their assigned role for that particular paper--and their colleagues in the group try to be helpful by

agreeing. The worst papers, therefore, seem to come from groups that fail to make distinctions about the responsibility of individuals for particular roles in theEditorial Group. The next major difficulty seems to stem from students who fail to pay attention to the Guide Sheets--who set out to prove that they know enough to get along without using this aid.

The most gratifying response I have had to this method of working with student on their writing comes from Editorial Groups that really try to use this approach. They say that they have to work very hard to stick to assigned roles in the group, but that doing so gives them insight into the group process as well as into writing--and they are pleased by the rather high quality papers they manage to present to their colleagues. Class evaluations show that the Editorial Group work and the ensuing group discussions of the papers are the class activities students almost invariably cite as most valuable to them in the course.

I did say, a while ago, that I had one class this term in which the Editorial Groups are not the basis of the course. I felt the first go-round of papers were particularly weak. The class doesn't seem to have a particularly good mix; it's a group I feel is difficult to work with. Also, I felt too many people in the class needed the sort of specific, individual help I just can't given them if we followed the Editorial Group procedure. So I discussed the situation with the class and many admitted to feeling lost in the Editorial Group process--so I simply dropped the idea and have turned to other teaching strategies.

In general, the Editorial Groups have cut down on my

at-home paper grading time. The end-of-term individually written papers are sometimes better than those resulting in classes taught in other ways. But during the term, students are more intensively involved in the writing process than most have ever been before. And they pay more attention to writing. On that score alone, it's a strategy I think worth continuing.